

Guitar

The Basics

Column #3 – Rhythm Chops

Okay, so we've been talking about chords and stuff for a couple columns. Let's shift away from that for a while and talk about another neglected aspect of your playing: rhythm.

I really piss off a lot of guitar players when I say the following:

Anyone can play lead guitar, but very few can play rhythm well.

They get angry because it's true. And they are generally as guilty of this as others who also get angry at me for making this point. I also believe that one good rhythm player is worth at least 25 lead players, precisely because anyone can play lead guitar, but not everyone can play good rhythm guitar.

Look folks, rhythm is what drives a song. A solo may be nice, but it isn't the song (though some lead players think songs were invented so they could play lead!). Nope, the song is what people remember, not the solo. When you are at a gathering with people, like a party or a campfire, and someone asks you to play, what they are asking you is simple: **please entertain us with a song** or two? They are not asking for a solo. They are asking you to perform a song that they can listen to, and maybe sing along with you. They'll be happy. And if you do the song well, they may ask for another.

So, then, good rhythm comes from a couple things. First, ***you have to practice***. Second, you have to have ***good time keeping skills***. That means ***playing with a metronome*** when you practice, whether songs or exercises. You must use the metronome to correct bad timing. And if you are not too proud, you should **take some lessons** from a good guitar teacher and specifically ask them to help you with rhythm playing, to get better, correct technique and whatever else may be in need of work in your ability. Then do what they tell you - especially if they are great rhythm players!

For beginning guitar players, changing from chord to chord **in time** is a real challenge. If you are struggling with this, just slow down your tempo - using a metronome to time yourself - and play one strum per click of the metronome. Play as slow as is necessary to make a smooth change to the next chord. And don't wimp out and omit 'hard' chords. Include them, too.

For the sake of brevity, we're going to assume most of you can do this already; so we can move forward to actual rhythm exercises you can practice. These are not designed to be complicated, they are designed to help you improve basic rhythm playing through the use of basic rhythm concepts you might actually encounter in the real world.

The first exercise is pure and simple up and down stroke strumming. But if you think this is really too simple, think again. Get out the metronome and set it to around 84 beats a minute. Yes, this is slow. That's the point. Playing slow is more difficult than playing fast because you must be more precise in your timing... the whole point of understanding rhythm: **timing and syncopation**.

So, here is the first exercise. The notation is purely for note duration timing, it is not intended as an accurate reflection of the chords being played. They are listed below the rhythm figure represented by the notation. Follow the strum direction above the notation; the count is above the up and down stroke symbols. Repeat the same pattern in the second measure.

1 & 2 & 3 & 4 &

Dm C G A

Yes, this is easy. But the real question is - and you have to be honest: **are you able to keep precise time?**

The second exercise is a little different. Everything in parentheses is not played, but the motion of your strum - the rhythmic sense - is continued. You just don't hit the strings during that part of the stroke. Count out loud, whispering the "silent strum" to help you 'hear' the rhythm. Hold the strum over until the next sounded stroke, giving the beat it's full expression. Play at about the same tempo, 84 bpm.

1 (&) 2 (&) 3 (&) 4 (&)

Em D C D

For this next one, you are going to be holding notes into the next beat, creating a different atmospheric expression. The line between beat 2 and the beginning of the 3rd beat is called a **tie**, and means to hold that for one and a half beats, then continue the sounded strum with the up stroke on the "&" of 3, along with a chord change. Again, count out loud and whisper the silent strokes to help you hear how this is supposed to sound. Play at slower tempos to check your precision.

1 (&) 2 (&) (3) (&) 4 (&)

A G D G

These exercises should give you a better sense of correct rhythmic timing. But let me be clear: honesty is important here.

You cannot “scuff” the up stroke just before a chord change – that is the point of the honesty. Are you **holding the chord** for the full duration of its application? Or are you already moving during the ‘&’ of the beat just before the new chord?

Yes, most players do this. You don’t have to do this. You should not settle for doing this. This is part of what good rhythm playing is about: **details**. If you pay attention to the details, you become a better player for it, and your rhythm playing becomes even cleaner for the precision you strive to achieve by taking the time to do it right!

And working with a metronome is absolutely essential to helping you develop good rhythm and good timing. This are the foundation to learning more about syncopation and other things we can go into at another time.

While these examples may be simple to many of you, and you can play them. The deeper goal is to be able to play them in correct time, placing strum and chord changes where they belong - by deliberate intent, not circumstance. You need to do everything deliberately, not haphazardly, and in a way that is repeatable. Good rhythm playing is just that, repeatable in a way that is consistent and dependable, and greatly desired in the other musicians you will play with.

You can replace the chords I’ve given with other chords, maybe more complex chords, to make the exercise a little more challenging. But be sure to have a little fun along the way, too.